STARK OPENING REMARKS AT HEARING ON HEALTH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – Representative Pete Stark (D-CA), Chairman of the Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, prepared the following opening remarks for today's hearing on Health Information Technology:

“I’m pleased to be here today for a hearing to discuss the importance of electronic medical records and the need to promote their adoption and use by the medical community.

“There is little doubt that the U.S. health care system is among the most advanced in the world in terms of diagnosing and treating disease. But when it comes to how medical records are stored and shared, we are stuck in the 19th century. This IT shortfall severely hampers our ability to provide the best care to people when they are ill.

“In my former life as a banker I helped create the way financial information is stored and electronically transmitted in this country. Go to virtually any ATM in the country and you can instantly withdraw money deposited in another bank, or you can deposit money to your bank and see certain account information. New technology allows you to receive and pay bills on line, all without any paper changing hands. Why shouldn’t we be able to do the same with medical records?

“I hold in my hand two years worth of medical records from a staffer of mine. This is well over 500 pages of materials. It weighs 5 pounds and cost more than $6 to ship. Getting these records required my staffer to make numerous phone calls to his doctor and pay a medical records company $127 to copy and print. Yet this is the only way he could get his records from one doctor to another -- because they are not stored electronically.

“Widespread use of electronic medical records --- or EMRs --- holds the promise for increasing the quality of health care while also bringing down costs. Adoption of EMRs by itself may have relatively little impact on quality or cost, but when combined with comparative effectiveness research and a greater emphasis on disease management through primary care, this technology has the potential to save the nation’s health care system tens of billions, perhaps hundreds of billions of dollars a year.

“Despite its promise, we are years behind other countries in terms of getting doctors, hospitals and other providers to use this technology. Germany, for instance, began a coordinated effort to develop a nationwide EMR system way back in 1993. Canada started in 1997 and Great Britain began its work toward a national EMR system in 2002. What’s more, those countries have invested billions of dollars in government funds toward the development of their systems.

“By contrast, the United States has been stuck in a rut. Only 10 to 20 percent of physicians in this country have a meaningful EMR system. The adoption rate among hospitals is hardly better at 20 to 30 percent.

“It wasn’t until 2004 that the federal government realized the need for leadership on this issue when

President Bush said that every American should have an EMR by 2014. By executive order he established an office within HHS to lead this effort. While the President and I happen to agree on the importance of this issue --- and we don’t agree on much --- I would point out that HHS has moved extremely slowly since then. The Agency seems more interested in pleasing vendors and other entrenched interested than in getting the job done.

“The lack of progress to date is precisely why I have called this hearing. And it is why I shall introduce legislation designed to promote the adoption and use of EMRs, while protecting patient privacy.

“This should not be seen as an effort to slow down other legislative efforts in this area. The opposite is true. My bill will be designed to speed up the development and adoption of EMR technology. It will:

• Ensure that the federal government continues to promote development of a comprehensive, fully interoperable EMR system.

• Provide meaningful financial incentives through the Medicare program that will overcome barriers to adoption.

• Take the necessary steps to protect the security and privacy of patient records by giving individuals the ability to sue for damages when their records are breached.”ï¿½